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US Military Action Against Libya:
Possible Implications for a US-Soviet Summit

Summary

Soviet actions and recent private comments by East Bloc officials suggest that Moscow does not want to escalate tensions with the United States over Libya. Even after the postponement of the meeting between Secretary Shultz and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, Gorbachev returned to the subject of the summit, stating that one could take place "if the appropriate international atmosphere" develops. The USSR's rhetorical stance has left open the possibility of further Soviet action, however, including the deferral of this year's summit. In considering such a step, the Soviets would have to weigh the prospects for progress on bilateral issues, and on arms control in particular, against their concern about losing prestige by proceeding with preparations for a summit while Washington was pursuing actions perceived as challenging to the USSR.

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This memorandum was prepared by [] the Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments are welcome and may be directed to [] the Chief, Strategic Policy Division, []

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[redacted] Moscow's postponement of the Shultz-Shevardnadze meeting was largely a symbolic expression of support for Libya and a way to save face with the USSR's Arab allies:

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- A senior Soviet official in a major West European embassy said to an American official that in his opinion, the US action had embarrassed the USSR before its Arab allies and had left it with no choice but to cancel the meeting. To have gone ahead with the meeting, he said, would have compromised Soviet interests in the Middle East.

[redacted]

Moscow seems to be avoiding actions that would lead to heightened tensions with the United States over Libya or that could encourage Qadhafi's adventurism. While the USSR has offered diplomatic and political support to Qadhafi and promised to bolster Libya's "defense capability," it has shied away from any specific commitment to come to his aid militarily:

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[redacted]

[redacted]

Moscow's authoritative reaction to the US air strikes--in a government statement and remarks by Gorbachev--has left open the door for a summit this year but also laid the rhetorical groundwork for canceling it, depending on future US actions in the international arena:

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- The USSR Government statement on 15 April demanded an "immediate end" to US actions against Libya and warned that "otherwise, more far-reaching conclusions will have to be drawn." It noted that prior to the latest US attack, the Soviet leadership had warned that continued US actions against Libya "could not but affect" US-Soviet relations.

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- [redacted]
- In his speech to the East German party congress on 18 April, Gorbachev said that Washington and European capitals should realize that such actions are doing direct harm to dialogue between the United States and the USSR. He said there "should be no pretending" that US-Soviet relations can develop independently of US behavior in the international arena.
 - In remarks to journalists in Potsdam on 20 April, Gorbachev said that if the US Government continues its current policies, which he said were exacerbating the international situation and destroying the spirit of Geneva, this could "deprive of value all plans for a future meeting."
 - In an address to East German workers on 21 April, Gorbachev said that a summit could take place if the "appropriate international atmosphere" develops and it will be justified if it leads to "real shifts toward disarmament." He said that the USSR was ready for this but that such readiness was not evident in Washington at the moment and that Washington was acting in "quite the opposite direction." [redacted]

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Soviet leadership statements and media commentary indicate that Moscow is not viewing the US air strikes as an isolated incident but rather as a manifestation of a broader US policy aimed at intimidating the USSR with US military strength. [redacted]

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[redacted] In talks with East German workers on 21 April he cited US policy toward Libya, Nicaragua, Angola, and Afghanistan as examples of an alleged US policy of "neoglobalism," and Soviet media have condemned US naval operations in the Black Sea, the supplying of Stinger antiaircraft missiles to rebel groups in Angola and Afghanistan, the cutting of the Soviet UN staff, and continued US nuclear testing. In a speech on 22 April, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze also asserted that there was an "organic link" between the "bursts of bombs" in Tripoli and Benghazi and US nuclear explosions in Nevada. [redacted]

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Even before the air strikes, Gorbachev had begun to voice increasing pessimism about the overall course of US foreign policy since his meeting last November with President Reagan. In an 8 April speech in the Soviet industrial city of Tolyatti, he charged that the United States had launched, "with new force," an anti-Soviet campaign. He claimed that Washington was trying to find "any pretext" to wreck an improvement in the international situation that had begun to manifest itself since the Geneva meeting. [redacted]

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Coupled with this purported concern about the overall direction of US policy are signs of an apparent skepticism in Moscow about the value of

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[REDACTED]

pursuing a dialogue with the United States if it did not lead to concrete results on arms control issues. In his Tolyatti speech, Gorbachev observed that the Central Committee had received "numerous letters" of concern from Soviet citizens who worried that the West would make a "spurt forward in arms" under the cover of peace and "fruitless" talks. Apparently attempting to allay any such concerns, he asserted that this would not happen and that the arms race "will not wear us out." In his address to the East German workers he reiterated this theme, saying that "Soviet people" often ask whether the United States "will not deceive us" and use the talks as a cover for building up its military muscle to acquire military superiority. He said the USSR will not be deceived and will not permit negotiations "to be used as a smokescreen." [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

It is unclear what impact the US air strikes may have had on Moscow's calculations with respect to the summit. If there are differences of view within the leadership on the value of holding a summit, the US airstrikes may have made it more difficult for Gorbachev to proceed with summit planning.

[REDACTED]

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Moscow almost certainly would prefer to play the summit card to influence the Administration's deliberations on bilateral issues, particularly on arms control, rather than expend it in reaction to the Libyan situation. Nonetheless, Soviet commentary and leadership statements suggest that an underlying concern in the Kremlin is the extent that US military and foreign policy actions make the USSR appear lacking in resolve, unsupportive of its allies, and weak-nerved in the face of demonstrations of US military strength. Against this backdrop, another US military action against Libya might well prompt Gorbachev to announce that the Kremlin's planning for a possible 1986 summit has been deferred. Such an action, or even a stronger statement, would be motivated less out of interest in showing support for

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Libya than by a perceived need to demonstrate resolve toward Washington in the face of a variety of US actions perceived to be challenging the USSR. Moscow would weigh the consequences of such a move against its assessment of the potential political, diplomatic, and propaganda value of a summit to its efforts to moderate the Administration's policy by engaging it in a political dialogue. [REDACTED]

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